

SEAN WILSON PIANO

How I hear any chord

Five practical levels — what every musician should be working toward

NOVICE

What to focus on

Sing the melody of any song back by ear. Given any song, write out the melody using single notes — no sheet music. Sing and identify the bass note of each chord. You should be able to write out the full bass line of any song by ear.

THE REAL CHALLENGE Shifting from the top note to the bottom note. Most musicians cannot do this at first.

BEGINNER

What to focus on

Recognize intervals automatically. Identify not just major vs minor — but which specific chord it is. Not "that's minor" — but "that's Eb minor." Combine your skills: top note tells you the inversion. Bass note tells you the slash. Full answer: "Eb minor with an F in the bass."

THE REAL CHALLENGE Naming the specific chord and inversion — not just recognizing the quality.

COMPETENT

What to focus on

Distinguish the 4 chord types — in context, not in isolation. Your ear now listens for whether a chord sounds at rest or like it is setting up another chord.

Major 7 — at rest

Minor 7 — at rest

Dominant — setup

Half-Dim — setup

Going from 3-note triads to 4-note chords opens hundreds of variations — chord context (target vs passing) is what helps you narrow it down fast.

THE REAL CHALLENGE Context. A chord does not live alone — where it sits in the progression tells you everything.

INTERMEDIATE

What to focus on

Hear tensions and extensions added on top of the 4 chord types. Build your own vocabulary by playing and using these chords — recognition gets faster as you do. Fully develop chord function and context: What was before it? What comes after? Is it a target chord, a passing chord, or in the middle of the progression?

THE REAL CHALLENGE Voicing and tension. Which notes were added beyond the basic chord structure?

ADVANCED

What to focus on

Use the entire system simultaneously, in real time. Identify chords you have never heard before — with no formal category — and still work them out. Chord type, function, context, tonal memory, and interval recognition all fire at the same time.

THE REAL CHALLENGE Knowing the chord IS the shortcut. Vocabulary is what makes this fast.

SEAN'S PERSONAL PROCESS

How I personally figure it out

1. Identify the top note and hold it in tonal memory.
2. Identify the bottom note. Compare both to a chord I already know.
3. Ask: does this note exist in that chord? Does this sound like a chord I have played?
4. Use chord function and context as a framing device to narrow it down.

This is more art than science. Not prescriptive — just how my ear works at a high level.

Hear it. Play it. Understand it.

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